Monika Mazurek
*Pedagogical University, Kraków*

# "Going over to Rome": The Changing Attitudes towards Roman Catholicism in Disraeli's *Sybil* and *Lothair*

In 1850 Disraeli wrote in a letter to a lady friend, "[h]ere [London] we have only two subjects, and both gloomy ones – Religion and Rents" (qtd. in Davis 1976: 103). In the Victorian age, the age of great religious revival, the influence of religion was extensive and included far more than just ecclesiastical matters. Religion was inextricably intertwined with politics and religious questions were the cause of the downfall of many a government; they also inspired writers ranging from mere hacks to the ones that are now widely considered to be canonical. One of the questions reappearing in the public discourse was the role of Roman Catholicism in England, still perceived by many as dangerous for English identity. The aim of this paper is to compare the attitudes of Disraeli towards Roman Catholicism, concentrating on his two novels: *Sybil* (1845) and *Lothair* (1870), and to explain the apparent radical change of Disraeli's views: in his earlier novels he seemed to be mostly sympathetic towards Catholicism while in *Lothair* he presented it as a threat to English society.

Disraeli's attitudes toward Roman Catholicism are coloured by his own religious identity. As is generally known, he was Jewish, baptized in the Church of England at the age of thirteen, apparently for purely pragmatic reasons; his father, who to all accounts seemed to be an agnostic in the mould of Enlightenment philosophers, made this decision in order to facilitate his children's future careers. Benjamin Disraeli, however, "never forgot nor let willingly others forget" his ethnic origins (Frietzsche 1961: 8). He made his Jewishness the cornerstone of his conservatism and had his omniscient and omnipotent Jewish character Sidonia in *Coningsby* (1844) argue that Jews are somehow born Tories, always in defence of the established institutions (Disraeli 1904: 302–303). Political conservatism also informed other fascinations of Disraeli: his admiration for the Middle Ages and his sympathetic attitude towards Catholicism. Indeed, in some novels, such as *Sybil*, Catholicism and medievalism seem to be inseparable. Catholics in Disraeli's novels are often presented as living

remnants of the past ages, long gone, but perceived as superior to the age of rapacious capitalism.

Pro-Catholic sympathies of the Tory Disraeli were by no means obvious nor common at the time of writing *Sybil*; anti-Catholicism in England had been a long-established tradition. In fact, it was one of the cornerstones of British identity, providing a link between different nations and different classes that inhabited Great Britain. The popular vision of English history was construed as a series of fortuitous events from the Reformation on, when the hand of God intervened over and over again to deliver England from Popery (the victory over the Spanish Armada, the Gun-Powder Plot, the Glorious Revolution and so on). However, in the late eighteenth century the danger of any real political intervention from the Pope or any of his subjects faded; Stuart pretenders had been vanquished, the Papal State established civil diplomatic relations with Britain and the British government tried to work out a mode of peaceful cohabitation with the growing numbers of its Catholic citizens, not only within Britain but also in the colonies, for instance in Quebec. A number of bills were passed, gradually relaxing the penal laws in Britain, and culminating with the Catholic Relief Act of 1829. However, the removal of anti-Catholic laws did not mean automatically the end of prejudice, but, conversely, the relaxation of the penal laws and the ensuing expansion of the Catholic Church served to fuel the suspicions of the Protestant majority all the more (Arnstein 1982: 3). It is a telling fact that several influential societies for propagating Protestantism, such as the British Reformation Society and the Protestant Association, were founded in the years immediately before or after the Catholic Emancipation (Paz 1992: 33–34).

Within this political and social context, the distinctly pro-Catholic sympathies of Disraeli in the novels written in the first half of his life are all the more striking. Catholics appear in *The Young Duke* (1831), *Contarini Fleming* (1832) and *Sybil* (1845), always presented as sympathetic figures. This is even more remarkable, taking into account the fact that Disraeli's own Tory party harboured some ultra-conservative members with decidedly anti-Catholic views. *Sybil* perhaps offers the clearest explanation of Disraeli's sympathies towards Catholicism in Book I, where Disraeli presents his Tory vision of history, which is the polar opposite of the Whig vision of history. Ostensibly delineating the family history of the main character Lord Egremont, he condemns all the events celebrated by Protestant Whigs as stages on the way of Britain towards parliamentarian democracy. The Reformation is presented as tantamount to the spoliation of monasteries, through which the family of Egremont gained

their riches, and the Glorious Revolution as an act of treason towards the lawful king, whom Disraeli exonerates from the charges of attempting to make England Catholic again: "That the last of Stuarts had any other object in his impolitic manoeuvres than an impracticable scheme to blend the two Churches, there is now authority to disbelieve" (Disraeli 1981: 21). The de-glorification of the Glorious Revolution is combined with the adulation of Charles I: "Rightly was King Charles surnamed the Martyr, for he was the holocaust of direct taxation. Never yet did man lay down his heroic life for so great a cause: the cause of the Church and the cause of the Poor" (Disraeli 1981: 230). This hero-worship of the Stuarts seems to evoke the faint echoes of Defoe's rant in his pamphlet "The shortest way with the Dissenters:" "You have Butcher'd one King, Depos'd another King, and made a mock King of a Third" (Defoe 1974: 116–17), except, of course, for the fact that Defoe was ironic, while Disraeli at least purported to speak seriously.

As we can see from the above, the first reason for Disraeli's criticism of the Whig vision of history runs more or less along the lines of Dr Johnson's observation, "the prejudice of the Tory is for establishment; the prejudice of the Whig is for innovation" (Boswell 1961: 1155); the main sin of the Whigs is that they ruin the established institutions and, as he shows in another part of *Sybil*, provide nothing in their place. This argument is illustrated in Book 2, where Egremont has a dispute with two men (who later turn out to be Chartists) in the ruins of an abbey, now belonging to his family. In the dispute Walter Gerrard, a Catholic and father to the heroine of the title, paints an idyllic vision of the Middle Ages as the time of contented peasants ruled by benevolent lords abbots, the happy era brutally terminated by the Reformation. The description that Disraeli puts in Gerrard's mouth goes against the well-rooted Protestant mistrust of monastic life, and Gerrard easily overthrows all traditional arguments against monks put forward by Egremont:

> "[. . .] their history has been written by their enemies; they were condemned without a hearing; the people rose oftentimes in their behalf; and their property was divided with those on whose reports it was forfeited."
> "At any rate, it was a forfeiture which gave life to the community," said Egremont; "the lands are held by active men and not by drones."
> "A drone is one who does not labour," said the stranger; "whether he wear a cowl or a coronet, 'tis the same to me. All agree the Monastics were easy landlords; their rents were low; they granted leases in those days."
> "And do you really think they were easier landlords than our present ones?" said Egremont, inquiringly.

> "Human nature would tell us that, even if history did not confess it. [. . .] The monks were in short in every district a point of refuge for all who needed succour, counsel, and protection; a body of individuals having no cares of their own, with wisdom to guide the inexperienced, with wealth to relieve the suffering, and often with power to protect the oppressed."
> "You plead their cause with feeling," said Egremont, not unmoved.
> "It is my own; they were the sons of the People, like myself."
> "I had thought rather these monasteries were the resort of the younger branches of the aristocracy?" said Egremont.
> "Instead of the pension list;" replied his companion, smiling, but not with bitterness. "Well, if we must have an aristocracy, I would sooner that its younger branches should be monks and nuns [. . .] but the list of the mitred abbots when they were suppressed, shows that the great majority of the heads of houses were of the people."
> (Disraeli 1981: 61–62)

The defence of Catholicism is carried on further by Aubrey St Lys, a clergyman who, though Anglican himself, defends the Catholic Church on the grounds that it "is to be respected as the only Hebræo-Christian church extant; all other churches established by the Hebrew apostles have disappeared, but Rome remains" (Disraeli 1981: 111). Therefore, the respect that St Lys pays to Rome is purely on the grounds of its being immediate successor to Judaism, just like the New Testament is "only a supplement" (Disraeli 1981: 112) to the Old Testament. The respect for Judaism and Jews as the font of Christianity was one of favourite topics of Disraeli, to which he returned over and over again, both in literature and politics, for instance when he spoke for Jewish emancipation. It might be argued, then, that for Disraeli Catholicism was Jewishness in disguise, and when he wrote in defence of one minority, he really thought about the other (O'Kell 1987: 221).[1]

This argument is even stronger when we look at his earlier novels such as *Contarini Fleming*. The title character is a black-haired, swarthy son of Italian mother and English father, who feels no affinity between himself and his pure-English blonde step-siblings: "[t]here was no similitude between us. Their blue eyes, their flaxen hair and their white visages claimed no kindred with my Venetian countenance. Wherever I moved, I looked around and found a race different from myself" (Disraeli 1832: 6). Contarini finally finds peace

[1] Interestingly enough, Protestant polemicists viewed the relationship between Catholicism and Protestantism in analogous terms to those in which Catholics viewed the relationship between Judaism and Catholicism: Protestants had to leave the Church of Rome behind just like early Christians had to leave Judaism (Griffin 2004: 5).

of mind when as an adult he goes back to his Italian roots and converts to Catholicism. It has been argued that the feeling of being an oddball expressed by Fleming is a clearly autobiographical element for Disraeli, who with his "Venetian countenance" may very well have felt the same in the English school playground (Davis 1976: 5).

The praises of monasticism are consistent with the ideology of Young England movement, a small coterie of young liberal Tories centred around Disraeli. As Disraeli himself observed in the General Preface to the collected edition of his novels published twenty five years later, Young England sought to achieve in politics what the Oxford Movement tried to achieve in religion: to revive old practices and customs, make the church a vital presence in society again, reawaken social responsibility among the possessing classes. In *Sybil* social responsibility is embodied by Mr Trafford, a Catholic and a socially responsible factory owner, who provides his workers with safe and healthy work conditions, public baths and schools. "In the midst of the village, surrounded by beautiful gardens [. . .] was the house of Trafford himself, who comprehended his position too well to withdraw himself with vulgar exclusiveness from his real dependents, but recognised the baronial principle, reviving in a new form, and adapted to the softer manners and more ingenious circumstances of the times" (Disraeli 1981: 182). As we can see, Mr Trafford is basically the industrial version of the good feudal lord. His adherence to the "old" religion emphasizes the link between his exemplary mill and Old Merry England that Young England tried to bring back to life.

*Sybil* was the penultimate novel of Disraeli before the long break of twenty-three years which he devoted solely to his political career. He returned to the novelistic career with *Lothair* (1870) after his first brief stint as the Prime Minister. The book was very successful commercially, perhaps the most successful of all Disraeli's novels, although it certainly owed at least some of its success to the curiosity of the public about a novel written by an ex-Prime Minister. In *Lothair* Catholicism plays a much larger role than in any of Disraeli's earlier novels because the whole novel represents a *psychomachia* for the soul of the eponymous character, where the contestants are Anglicanism, Catholicism and Revolution, all of them represented in an allegorical manner by beautiful women.

The direct inspiration for the novel was the conversion of the young Marquess of Bute to Catholicism, which caused much stir in English society (Arnstein 1982: 131–32). Like Bute, Lothair is a young aristocrat who lost both his parents at an early age and was left under the care of two guardians, one of them a Scottish Presbyterian, the other an Anglican priest who later

converts to Catholicism and embarks on a rapid career advancing to the rank of Cardinal. At the start of the novel Lothair is about to come of age and has to decide what to do with his life and his immense wealth. He is a Candide-like character, believing almost everything he is told; he is also a bit like Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro*, since all the women he encounters are portrayed as immensely attractive. He wants to marry the first woman he comes across, that is Lady Corisande, the sister of his school friend, but her mother sensibly rejects the proposal. Then he becomes acquainted with the Catholic family of St Jeromes and in order to please the beautiful niece of Lady St Jerome, Clare Arundel, he starts to take part in Catholic masses with gentle encouragement of Cardinal Grandison, his former guardian. Finally he falls in love with Theodora, an Italian patriot fighting for the unity of her country and joins her in the campaign against the Papal State. Theodora, wounded in a battle, asks Lothair on her death-bed to promise that he will never become a Catholic. Lothair himself is soon wounded and saved by Clare, who is at that time in Rome with St Jeromes. In Roman society Lothair's deliverance is widely believed to be miraculous, and rumours are spread that he is going to convert to Catholicism. Disgusted with this intrigue and spurred on by the vision of Theodora's ghost, Lothair manages to sneak away and travels to the Holy Land, from which he returns spiritually regenerated and, since Clare decided to take the veil, proposes finally to Corisande and is accepted. As we can see, the romantic entanglements of Lothair follow a neat pattern: from Corisande, to Clare, to Theodora and via Clare to Corisande again (Flavin 2005: 159).

There are some elements that *Lothair* and *Sybil* have in common, among them the admiration for the idealized vision of the Middle Ages. What sets Lothair off on his spiritual-cum-romantic quest is his dissatisfaction with the present times. "Lothair's plea 'I wish I had been born in the Middle Ages' is, in essence, a familiar refrain from a Disraelian hero" (Flavin 2005: 155). In spite of his distrust of Catholicism, Disraeli also retains his fascination with Catholic art, ritual and ceremony; in fact, in *Lothair* it is even more visible than in *Sybil*.

> The acolytes and the thurifers fell into their places; there seemed no end of banners and large golden crosses; great was the company of the prelates [. . .] a long purple line, some only in cassocks, some in robes, and mitred; then came a new banner of the Blessed Virgin, which excited intense interest, and every eye was strained to catch the pictured scene. After this banner, amid frequent incense, walked two of the most beautiful children in Rome, dressed as angels with golden wings; the boy bearing a rose of Jericho, the girl a lily. After these, as was understood, dressed in black and veiled, walked six ladies, who were said to be daughters of the noblest

houses of England, and then a single form with a veil touching the ground.
(Disraeli 1870: 2. 133–34)

However, the whole ceremony, which Lothair attends out of politeness to his hosts, turns out to be a ruse set up by the Catholic Church to lure Lothair into its fold. The description of this attempt at spiritual seduction uses all the staple motifs of cautionary tales of Victorian popular literature: attractive Catholic members of the opposite sex serving as bait, priests who never walk but only "glide," the deceptive beauty of art and ritual. The only difference is that the main character is a man since in anti-Catholic novels of the time it was mostly women who were in danger of being converted or, even worse, lured into a convent[2].

The first reason for Disraeli's change of heart towards Catholicism might be the fact that in writing *Lothair* he wanted to settle an old score with Cardinal Manning, who in his opinion had stabbed him in the back by supporting the Liberals during the dispute on the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland and thereby contributed to the quick end of his first government. We must not forget that Disraeli was a politician who happened to write novels, and for the most part he used them as speaking platforms to air his views on various political and social issues. Apart from expressing noble sentiments about the condition of England, Disraeli also sometimes used fiction in a somewhat less noble manner to "vent his spleen on political enemies" (Frietzsche 1961: 41). Describing Cardinal Grandison, Lothair's ex-guardian and the *spiritus movens* in the scheme of converting his former charge to Catholicism, Disraeli slips comfortably into all the old clichés of anti-Papist literature, which were actually becoming unfashionable in the 1870s but still could serve his purpose. He presents an Anglican convert very much like Manning: a smooth-tongued, devious character, endearing to everyone he meets and loyal only to the Pope. However, Disraeli apparently got over his disappointment with Manning's "betrayal," since a few years later he was able to present a fairer portrait of the cardinal in *Endymion* (1880) (Frietzsche 1961: 42). Another proof that Disraeli did not harbour old grudges, at least not enough to impede his social life, was that two years after publishing *Lothair* he was one of the official witnesses at the wedding of Marquess Bute, officiated by Cardinal Manning (Griffin 2004: 186).

Apart from personal disappointments, there were also larger issues at stake. In the period between *Sybil* and *Lothair* the number of converts to Catholicism

[2] For the use of this plot, see Frances Trollope, *Father Eustace: A Tale of the Jesuits* (1847) and Catherine Sinclair, *Beatrice, or The Unknown Relatives* (1852).

increased and "in the minds of many Englishmen became a flood" (Arnstein 1982: 40– 41). The interestingly oppressed and slightly exotic minority became a strong and militant force, not only because of high-profile conversions but also because of the immigration of several hundred thousand Irishmen. However, Disraeli focuses on upper-class converts. As he perceives aristocracy as "the natural leaders," he sees their conversions as the acts of defection. "When I hear of young nobles, the natural leaders of the land, going over to the Roman Catholic Church, I confess I lose heart and patience. It seems so unpatriotic, so effeminate," says Lady Corisande (Disraeli 1870: 1. 69). Indeed, the Catholics portrayed in the most satirical way are the "new" Catholics, converts such as Cardinal Grandison and Lady St Jerome. Lord St Jerome is an "old Catholic" and a real English gentleman, opposing the devious machinations of Cardinal Grandison.

Even though Disraeli praises Catholicism in *Sybil* and criticizes it in *Lothair*, he basically remains faithful to his "prejudice of establishment:" the "old" Catholics are praiseworthy for their adherence to their faith, the "new" show their lack of purpose by allowing themselves to be sucked in by the whirlpool of Rome if they do not show enough firmness of mind. He writes reproachfully about the new English converts in Rome: "all the beautiful young countesses who had 'gone over' to Rome, and all the spirited young earls who had come over to bring their wives back, but had unfortunately remained themselves" (Disraeli 1870: 2. 160). Moreover, in *Sybil* the Catholic Church practically does not appear in its institutional form, apart from the convent where Sybil lived and was educated by the kindly Mother Ursula. In *Lothair*, on the other hand, the Catholic Church on the threshold of the First Vatican Council, which was to pronounce the dogma on papal infallibility, is a vast organization, becoming ready to take over the globe:

> And first of all Lothair was presented to the cardinal-prefect of the Propaganda, who presides over the ecclesiastical affairs of every country in which the Roman Church has a mission, and that includes every land between the Arctic and the Southern Pole. This glimpse of the organized correspondence with both the Americas, all Asia, all Africa, all Australia, and many European countries, carried on by a countless staff of clerks in one of the most capacious buildings in the world, was calculated to impress the visitor with a due idea of the extensive authority of the Roman Pontiff. (Disraeli 1870: 2. 123–24)

This vision of the Roman Catholic Church as an efficient and menacing bureaucratic machine stands in stark contrast with the quoted earlier romanticised

image of the English medieval church in *Sybil*, romanticised because belonging safely to the past. After all, the dispute on monasticism between Egremont and Gerrard takes place in the *ruins* of Mowbray Abbey while Gerrard's daughter, the eponymous heroine, has removed herself in order to sing an evening hymn to the Virgin. In *Sybil* we have a lone figure of a lovely young woman occupied with pleasantly mysterious and picturesque rituals in a long defunct church; in *Lothair* we face a powerful international organization. It could be inferred that Catholicism for Disraeli was more of a convenient symbolic shortcut, a wormhole to his idealized vision of the Middle Ages. The moment when it started to function as a real organized religion in the contemporary world, it stopped being a sentimental reminder of the past and became a living, greedy and rapacious organization.

The difference between attitudes towards Catholicism in *Sybil* and *Lothair* seems, then, to have its roots in the difference between Catholicism as the symbolic entity and the Roman Catholic Church as an actual contemporary institution. In *Sybil* the vision of Catholicism is highly romanticised, and it seems mostly to be a picturesque relic, just like the ruins of the abbey are. In *Lothair* the Catholic Church is a very real and powerful institution, endangering what was closest to Disraeli's conservative heart: the established English institutions, including the Church of England. This change in Disraeli's mindset might be read as an ironic twist provided by history along the lines of "beware of dreams, they may come true." Disraeli saw the "old religion," which he praised from a safe historical distance, coming back to life in his own country, and he recoiled with horror. *Lothair* might be seen as Disraeli's coming to the conclusion that it is best to leave monasteries in ruins.

## REFERENCES

Arnstein, W. L. 1982. *Protestant Versus Catholic in Mid-Victorian England: Mr Newdegate and the Nuns*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.

Boswell, J. 1961 [1799]. *Life of Johnson*. London: Oxford University Press.

Davis, R. M. 1976. *Disraeli*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.

Defoe, D. 1974 [1702]. "The shortest way with the Dissenters." In *The Shortest Way with Dissenters and Other Pamphlets*. London: William Clowes and Sons.

Disraeli, B. 1904 [1844]. *Coningsby, or The New Generation*. London & Edinburgh: R. Brimley Johnson.

Disraeli, B. 1832. *Contarini Fleming*. New York: J & J Harper.

Disraeli, B. 1870. *Lothair*. 2 vols. Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz.

Disraeli, B. 1981 [1845]. *Sybil, or The Two Nations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Flavin, M. 2005. *Benjamin Disraeli: The Novel as Political Discourse*. Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press.

Frietzsche, A. H. 1961. *Disraeli's Religion: The Treatment of Religion in Disraeli's Novels*. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Griffin, S. 2004. *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O'Kell, R. 1987. "Two nations or one? Disraeli's allegorical romance." *Victorian Studies* 30: 211–34.

Paz, D. G. 1992. *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.